

INEVITABLE RECONSTRUCTIONS
ADDRESSING HISTORY AND LOCAL IDENTITY THROUGH A TEACHING
PRACTICE COMPLEMENTING ALLOGRAPHIC DRAWING WITH STRATEGIES OF
AUTOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATIONS.

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LOOKING AT URBAN SITES AS INEVITABLY HISTORICAL

In this article, we describe our teaching practice as part of an interdisciplinary practice in order to accommodate a synergy between the description of objective propositions (i.e. conceived space) and the description of the ostensible (i.e. perceived space) in relation to an architecture practice where each project aims to address both historic and current aspects specific to the site. As architects in practice and education we aim at the observation of space as deeply rooted in a cultural and socio-political history, as such, we actively acknowledge what Henri Lefebvre describes as Social Space; a space that is ultimately experienced and not merely objectively observed [1]. The world we experience today is entrenched by an infiltrating and ever extending communication apparatus, surpassing travel and physical migration, giving birth to simultaneous attendance in a super-metropolis of multiple interlaced localities. With our teaching practice we aim at the deployment of an explorative platform in search of many specific yet coherent views of this metropolitan landscape and with it its history. As such, our work is not set in linear reference to a previous timeframe yet acknowledges history as a network of intersecting timelines. These intersecting timelines, suggest something resembling a fabric of history, a woven mesh, as opposed to a merely linear thread. This allows us to look at urban sites through multiple pasts still resonating in the present. An important output of this particular viewing of history is a mode of thinking where it becomes increasingly more difficult to think outside or after history and much more appealing to sustain within its mesh of time. This way, we are confronted with the study of history beyond the scholastic notion of objectivism and serial events. Instead we can look at histories; as simultaneous drifts [4] of story telling drafted by particular zeitgeists, constructed and deconstructed to appear seemingly

galvanized. As educators, we need to allow for an unpicking, a re-evaluation and eventually a re-composition of what once appeared as ‘matters of fact’.

To do so, we aim for a critical positioning, a ‘relative attitude towards history’ [2] by escaping a historical periphery in search for relevant points of intersection and overlap, particular to the site and the project at hand. The projects we discuss and describe in this paper address the city through the lens of place making, in search for relative authenticity. This involves a design attitude where an urban site is investigated as a place of intersecting social, historical, and technical trajectories. Projects thus address environments of ‘connective-ness’, where a multitude of indigenous and distant elements start to overlap and intersect in search for a site’s reciprocal identity and this mainly through the act of drawing.

IMPLEMENTING A PLURALISTIC VIEW TOWARDS HISTORY TO DEPLOY THE CONCEPT OF RELATIVE AUTHENTICITY

To better understand a practice in search for a site’s reciprocal identity, it is of great importance to acknowledge various doctrines guiding an attitude towards renovation and restoration practice. Up to this day, the preservation doctrine established through the Venice Charter (1964) [3], still defines renovation practice as part of a ‘positivist truth-based method’. This objective approach to renovation implies somehow the substantiation of a material fetish aiming to consolidate historical sites as valuable material substance, ideally ‘frozen’ in a distant past; thus designating it to a particular timeframe. This notion of looking at historical sites as pure material form, isolated in time, does allow for certain blindness towards significant socio-cultural information, implicit to any location still active in the present.

With the Burra Charter, issued in 1979 [4], we see a shift towards the incorporation of a more relative or contextual notion of truth in the way the status of a historical site is defined. By looking at historical sites inclusive current socio-cultural information surrounding the site, the understanding of its authenticity is not developed through a singular historical timeframe but through understanding history as a simultaneous ‘drift’ of important information uninterruptedly connecting past with present.

The Nara Documents, issued in 1994 [5] build on these ideas of cultural relativism and express a strong desire to oppose the notion of authenticity as a ‘fixed concept’ and instead propose a more evaluative attitude; taking into account the context of individual cultures particular to the site. As such, we observe two contrasting concepts; defining or searching for authenticity through the reconciliation of a material past on the one hand and defining authenticity through a ‘relative attitude towards history’ on the other.

In our design studios students are asked to adopt the idea of relative authenticity to allow them to look at places as pluralists; inclusive the mnemonic richness of each site

across different timeframes. Too often, in the narration of history, (i.e. exhibitions, theatre, film but also architecture) history is portrayed through the notion of a false unity or 'pure historical timeframe' supporting the narration of history following a preset historical classification system; separating renaissance painting from baroque sculpture etc. In real life, of course, objects and spaces from many periods, old and new, surround us simultaneously; any pursue in excluding such mix-up and overlaps seems to accommodate a sense of denial.

In 2003 we developed an architectural proposal for the New Valletta Coldstores (fig 1) with our practice, illustrating an early take on the cultivation of a relative attitude towards history. The project is set against the outer bastion wall of Valletta; a UNESCO protected city and capital of Malta. The project describes an architectonic object as a collector and re-distributor of indigenous and distant information to generate a 'site-explicit' proposal [6]. The new design for the Valletta Coldstore building accommodates a warehouse extension to the existing subterranean vaults, hidden in the Valletta Bastions, built by the Knights of Malta. Additional to the warehouse function the new design provides for new office spaces and a small retail outlet. The site for this new building is a narrow ditch between a row of 18th century shop houses, facing the Valletta Harbour and the Valletta Bastions. As a design initiator, a preliminary stone volume is imagined, lodged in-between these two major limestone constructions, the very material the entire island is made of. This preliminary megalith is subjected to a series of subtractions to gradually generate its final outline. Local climatic conditions are used parameters to subtract proportions from the preliminary megalith to slant the west façade away from direct sunlight and carve into the east façade flanking the bastion wall to provide views of the sky above. The use of limestone urges a solidity to withstand the Mediterranean climate and takes on old concepts of stone construction and climate regulation. The drawing of this building is established through what we have come to define as an aesthetic sensing of, in this case, 18th century military architecture and shaped further by 19th century trade routes. In doing so we consciously avoid the integration or reference to historic aesthetic precedents. The resulting architecture does indeed address a multitude of contextual information, seen and unseen, across different timeframes yet does hold qualities of 'strangeness' by standing explicitly different against its material setting. As such, any iconic linkage is avoided, supporting the driving principle of dislocating the form of this building from its conventionally associated meaning or symbolic value, without denying the presence and even the importance of such values [7]. A design process through traditional encounters and multiple historical considerations thus allows for the avoidance of picturesque clichés. The resulting architecture gains an almost 'observational' status, reciprocating

an active gaze towards history and sets up a paradoxical spatial interchange of simultaneous qualities of 'distant and near'. Architecture as latent observer takes on a critical distance for it does not need to accommodate a literal resemblance to observed historical elements and principles. It is through this 'strangeness' that such architecture can perform as part of a cumulative yet inter-subjective memory nurturing the construction of a state of remembrance for all who enter and experience the stone carved spaces. This act of inscribing a narrative capacity into our architecture addresses that what we have described as the *memorial and monumental values of our built environment*. [8]

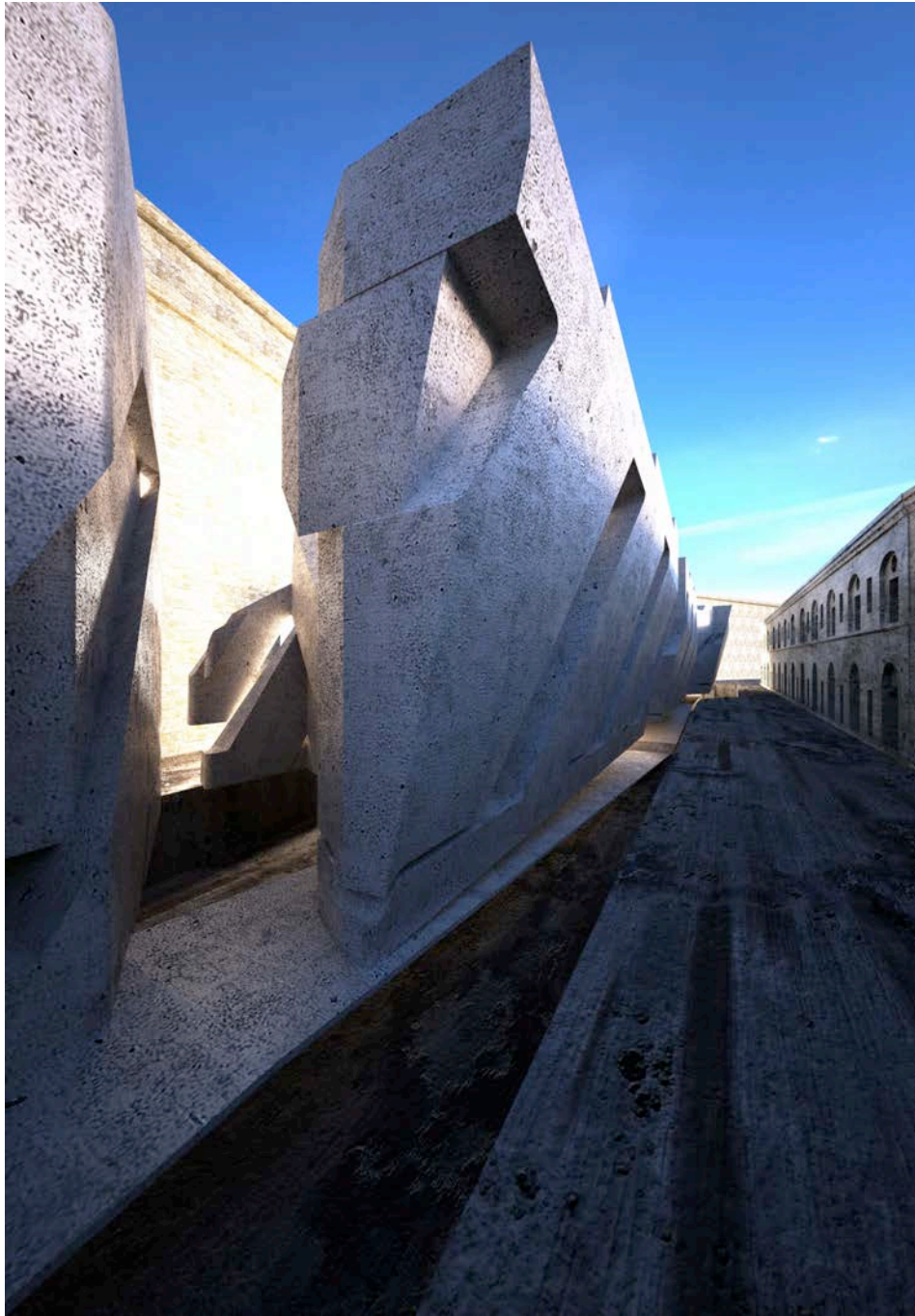


fig 1. New Valletta Coldstore building – North View facing 18th Century Coldstore buildings, Architectural Diagram, by Architecture Project accommodating a warehouse extension to the existing subterranean vaults of Valletta.

To develop a negotiating position vis-à-vis concepts of absolute and relative authenticity we work through curriculum structures where drawing is used to describe both objective and experiential environments; urging the setup of an intellectual interchange between conceived and perceived spaces or indeed absolute and relative authenticity. As a conduit into exploring these modes of conceived and perceived space we compose our studio teaching as a meandering between the use of drawing as a representational tool, in line with architectural professional codes, thus describing quantifiable space and the use of drawing as a perceptive tool in order to examine performative aspects of everyday life. As such, objective observations towards the physical and technological are complemented with more subjective observations towards the sensorial and emotional to enable a critical dialogue between that which might be categorized as allographic drawing practice and that which might be explored through autographic representational strategies.

Architect and author Stan Allen [9] describes the architectural drawing as a combination between three distinct practices. On the one hand as representational; since it describes quantities and qualities in a space other than that of the medium of the drawing. On the other hand he describes architectural drawing practice through notation and the production of diagrams which are often much more successful in expressing an experience of a building for example. His definition of architectural drawing; representational on the one hand and ‘expressive’ (through notation and diagrams) on the other is in fact based on a distinction between autographic and allographic art forms as first described by the American Philosopher Nelson Goodman (1976). The concept of autographic art forms is defined through the notion that its value is in the original, which means that its authenticity is clearly depending on direct contact with the author. An example of this would be a painting or sculpture where a replica of the artwork cannot be considered equal. Allographic art is “capable of being reproduced at a distance from the author by means of notation” [9]. An example of this would be music scores. As it is a notational system musicians can interpret through learned conventions and then perform anywhere with the possibility of creating new experiences. One can clearly see how architectural construction drawings can be considered to perform in line with musical notation.

The diagram however, as Stan Allen describes it, is again different from notation in that it does not rely on learned conventions. The diagram is a drawing specific to its author and can be open to many interpretations because it is not driven by learned conventions. We all know the diagram serving an explanatory function clarifying how to put together a toy or a piece of furniture for example. However, as Stan Allen explains [9] the primary function of the diagram is an abstract means of thinking about organization or

indeed program and its distribution in space, excluding the conventional dichotomy between form and function. I remember a photo of Ai Weiwei holding two hands full of his *Sunflower Seeds* standing in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern where 100 million of these hand-painted ceramic objects covered a section of the vast floor. With this image in mind I re-read what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari wrote in *A Thousand Plateaus* [10]; “*An abstract machine in itself is not physical or corporeal, any more than it is semiotic; it is diagrammatic.... It operates by matter, not by substance; by functioning, not by form...The diagrammatic or abstract machine does not function to represent, even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality*”. When the exhibition opened in October 2010 people could walk over this carpet of handmade *Sunflower Seeds*. 1600 Specialists working in small-scale workshops in Jingdezhen for about 6 years followed traditional methods of crafting for what has historically been one of China’s most prized exports. When Ai Weiwei invites us to walk over *Sunflower Seeds* he in fact invites us to re-assess the ‘Made in China’ phenomenon and with it the geo-politics of cultural and economic exchange today. Very quickly however did Tate Modern make it impossible for people to walk over *Sunflower Seeds*, officially due to health and safety issues regarding dust but also due to the many people taking away hands full of porcelain. There are thus two ways of reading this work of art; one could value *Sunflower Seeds* as indeed something physical, which of course it is, explaining why people would take away porcelain. As opposed to this one could value the installation as diagrammatic; operating as “*a basic structure which can be open for possibilities, a tool to set up new questions*” as Ai Weiwei himself explains in an interview with Tate Modern Unilever Series in 2010.

It is this type of ‘diagramming’, performing as an abstract machine - a tool for questioning - that we are interested in to allow us to ‘draw’ and study experiential and social qualities of space. To support a capacity to observe the world beyond its objective appearance and investigate that what we have come to describe as a site’s relative authenticity.

USING AUTOGRAPHIC DRAWING AS MODE OF REPRESENTATION TO UNPACK RELATIVE – EXPERIENTIAL QUALITIES OF THE SITE AND DEVELOP VIEWS OF THE UNSEEN

“To develop an ontology of the always not yet formed as opposed to the already formed”

In his ‘The Production of Spaces’, Henri Lefebvre [1] describes how our western industrialized world overwhelms us with concepts of objectifying abstraction. With this, he refers to the inherent characteristic of a consumer society wherein everything can be turned into a traded object, in such a way that even sensory aspects of

our everyday life are dealt with in terms of quantifiable commodities and categories. He describes how concepts of objectifying abstraction stand at the basis of a professional authority, such as architecture, to describe and engage with abstract space by privileging the element of 'conceived space' (mathematically qualified and conceptualized space), and repressing the element of experienced space or 'perceived space'.

This observation leads Lefebvre to distinguish three categories of spaces (or what he calls 'fields'); physical space (conceived as a product of processes of thinking, abstracting, measuring, categorising, etc.) and mental space (perceived through experience, memory, allegory, smell, touch, etc.) form the basis. Then there is a third field that he describes as social space, a space that can only be lived and that is a combination of physical space and experienced space, becoming, as a result, a container of social myths and narratives. When we deploy our teaching practice as part of an interdisciplinary practice navigating between allographic and autographic it is to accommodate the study of this lived space. To allow students to produce architectural proposals that are not just an answer to physical or programmatic issues but something much more complex; the idea of social space; lingering everywhere in the city but as it appears to us yet too often overlooked.

Lefebvre argues that our basic understanding of the world is devised by a sensory spatial relationship between our body and the world. Our understanding of space is in direct correlation to the understanding of our bodies spatial presence, long been suppressed by Cartesian duality. His central claim, that space is a social product, directly challenges the predominant western (Cartesian) "idea that empty space is prior to whatever ends up filling it." [1]. "Western philosophy has betrayed the body; it has actively participated in the great process of metaphorization that has abandoned the body; and it has denied the body." [1] Lefebvre describes the body, as simultaneous subject and object and can therefore not tolerate the conceptual division between body and space.

In 2008 we developed a design studio with aim to set up an environment for students to develop methodologies that facilitate the exploration of design/drawing through different levels of perception. This was achieved by asking students to draw perceived space to complement the usual drawing of measured or conceived space. The project was titled "Lost in Space" [10], setting up a 'design discourse as detour' to enable students to escape habitual objective design approaches and focus more on the sensory spatial relationship between their own body and the world. The studio combines two seemingly unrelated creative environments; dance and drawing serving as overlapping territories for students to study notions of spatial composition. Students underwent training in contemporary dance for the duration of two weeks. The dance studio, led by

Maltese choreographer Sandra Mifsud served as an arena for experimentation encouraging students to study the inevitable yet not always acknowledged relationships between body and space. As part of the dance training, students were required to develop a series of choreographic studies using their own body. They subsequently study their bodily compositions in space by relating to the drawing of axonometric diagrams that encoded these movements on paper prior to using these to design prosthetic devices with in order to support the body in a particular 'dance routine'. In preparation for the drawing of these diagrams, students recorded their choreographic studies by means of video and photography and edited this footage through postproduction software. The provision of these overlapping disciplinary trajectories allows students to meander between the experiential and the analytical; syncopating between moments of spatial performance (i.e. choreographic studies using the body) and moments that capture this performance through diagramming. This way we urge the development of design agendas incorporating the description of space through the performance of the human body. Here indeed the focus is on establishing a 'drawing language' to represent dynamic environments as opposed to the delineation of a stable object or series of objects.

DRAWING OF PERCEIVED SPACE (AS OPPOSED TO CONCEIVED SPACE)

In practice, our drawing discourse is initiated by isolating a figure from its original narrative framework. With 'The Gate Drawings' (fig 2) tracing the demolition of the entrance gate to Valletta, the first 'act' of the drawing entails a minute manual tracing of historical information on the site as historical drawings and film footage are projected onto a drawing board. The process of tracing repeats itself multiple times to create series of densely stratified drawings. *"Projecting onto a drawing board at large scale and sitting at the pixel end of the image, allows one to reside in a position so close to the representation that one can only see parts of the totality. In this instance, one is not able to reflect and take critical decisions (informed decisions), one is only able to surrender uncritically to what is visible in close up, and cannot relate the pixel to the exact representational categories they belong to. One starts to engage with a thinking process resisting the representational"*. [11] The debris of this once statuesque architecture is precisely mapped, the void space described through open lines, while closed linear forms depict solid materials. Dotted lines indicate their trajectories. As such the drawing is an overlay of notations depicting multiple trajectories in time and space. Lines fall into each other, are broken and reformed. A reframing of space is observed and the process of entropy is irreversibly set in motion. The moment of collapse in a system refers to the moment where everything fundamentally falls apart to

reveal the start of a new discovery. In this investigation it refers to the moment where the drawing evidences the conceptual approach of visualizing perceived space. In this collapsing gate, space is released from constraint, physical structure gives way to gravity in a 'drawn down' force, and there is a metaphysical unlocking of the structures resistance. In a moment a void is filled with the unraveling that destruction allows. The fabric of the building that once made a volume is now altered, its material integrity released and a new spectacle of undoing comes into play. [12]

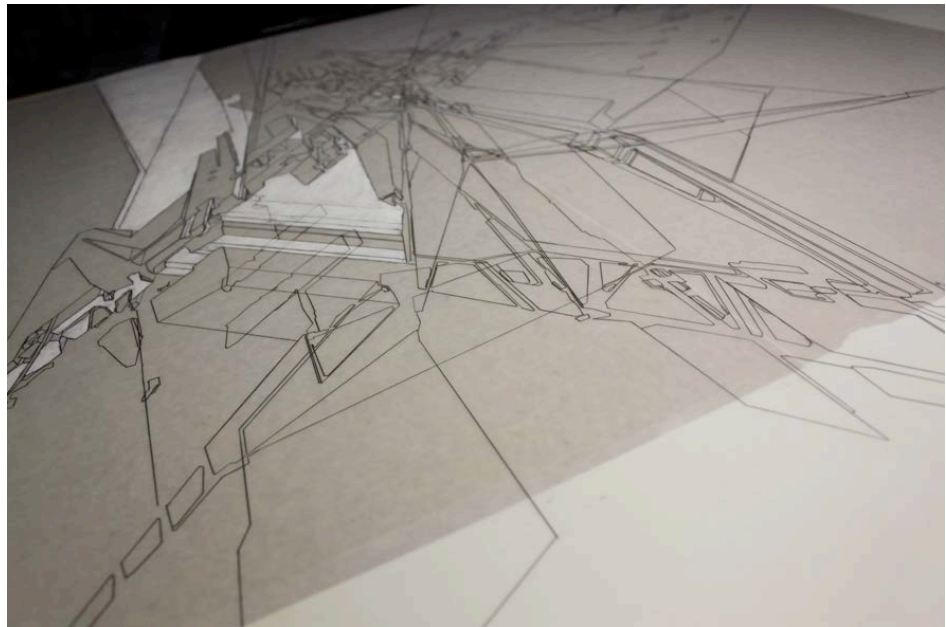
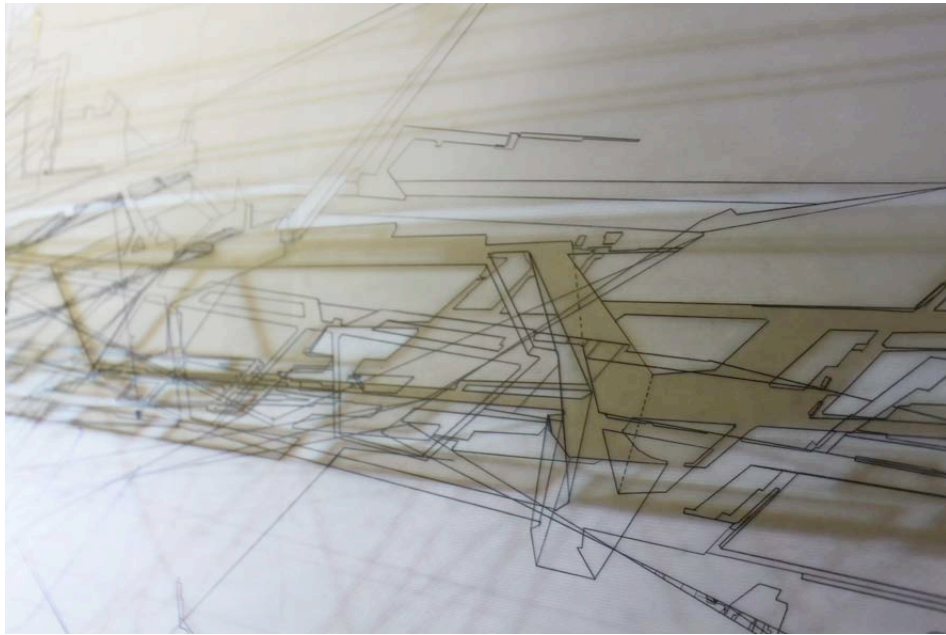
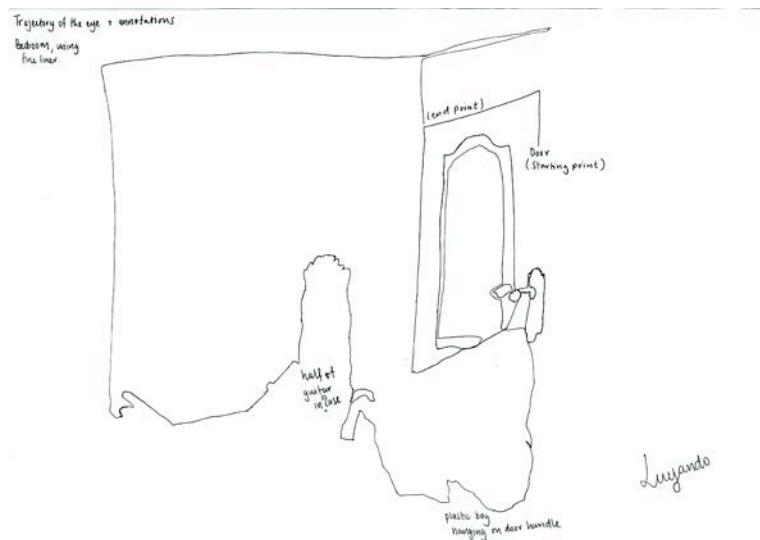


Fig 2; The Gate Drawings by Architecture Project, 2013: drawing historical traces to define new field conditions

With a vague reference to Andre Breton's process of 'Ecriture Automatique', we devised 'The Drawing Unit' (fig 3), aimed at incoming students, as such translating concepts described in the above in the most preliminary and intuitive way. The students are supported in the acquisition of a new skill (in this case perspective drawing) through the discovery and the unpacking of existing skills. We do this to clearly indicate an appreciation of the individual significance of each student. A particular site provides an environment for analysis whilst 'the drawing hand' provides a human frame of reference exploring responses and requirements in relation to the immediate environment. The main objective of the unit is to introduce students to the concept of perspective drawing. We do this not by focusing on a geometric skill set of one point perspective drawing (conceived space) but instead by focusing on students implicit yet dormant observational capacities (towards perceived space). The unit expects each to produce a very large amount of single line hand drawings to allow each, so accustomed in fast-mediated encounters, to sustain in a moment of experiencing space. The unit is organised according to four basic components in the unpacking of perceptual skills.

- Perception of edges; students focus their vision onto an edge in space and draw the trajectory of this edge by hand as a continuous line on paper without lifting the hand. This could be the edge of a door, going into the edge of a ceiling beam, the outline of a spotlight, etc. During the process of drawing the student is encouraged not to look at the paper whilst drawing. They produce a quantity of 70 of such drawings on A3.
- Perception of space; follows a similar strategy yet now students do not draw a linear trajectory of an edge yet focus on the observation and drawing of a 'space' defined by a closed edge. As such students focus on the negative spaces between objects and by drawing these make visible that-what-is-not.
- Perception of relationships; combines the two above drawing strategies (edges & spaces) for students to draw and study the edge condition between two negative spaces. They again focus on a particular area in the given site and produce 70 drawings on A3.

- Perception of unseen form; is the final chapter to this task of 280 drawings where students continue to draw perceived relationships yet are allowed to anticipate new or alter existing relational conditions. These conditions are only graphical in nature and exist within the site of the paper. We see that at the start of this unit students produce mainly abstract line drawings yet it is astonishing to witness how after a while most starts to draw 'accurate' perspective drawings. The act of drawing here is explored as a cognitive process studying perceived space to complement the exploration of more technical capabilities of drawing or the registration of conceived space at a later stage.



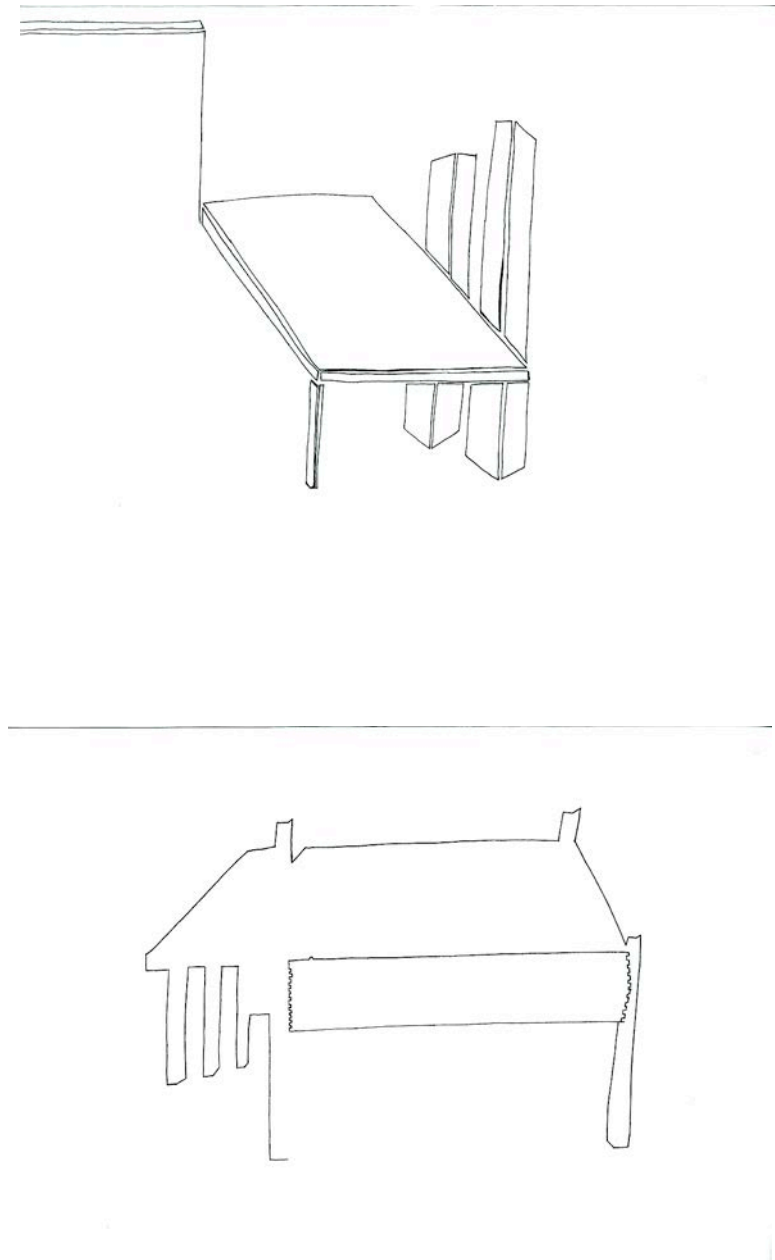


Fig 3; 'The Drawing Unit'; Perception of edges & Perception of space

A SPECULATIVE WIREFRAME

With this writing we have attempted to correlate a number of concepts collected and borrowed from different disciplines and fields of research. Clearly understanding the implicit danger when correlating one concept with yet another and conscious of the fact most linkages provided still hold unforeseen in-between value, we see this current network of intersecting concepts as a possible structure through which we can explore an architecture practice preoccupied with conceived space.

We link the idea of *absolute authenticity*, referring to a material fetish when valuing historic architecture, to a western preoccupation with *conceived space*, a space that is measured and conceptualized and represented through modes of *allographic* depiction, a mode of drawing implementing learned conventions.

As a countermeasure we connect a practice in search of *relative authenticity* to a more imaginative practice of *autographic* drawing to set up a platform, for ourselves and the students we teach, to study and design within the boundaries of conceived space only to complement a well versed scientific practice of architecture.

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